

# ETHNIC AND POLITICAL EXTREMISM in THE REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA

MAPPING THE MAIN ACTION FRAMEWORKS  
IN THE EXTREMIST SCENES

ASSOCIATION OF CITIZENS - NEXUS CIVIL CONCEPT  
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ETHNIC AND POLITICAL EXTREMISM IN  
NORTH MACEDONIA:  
Mapping the main action frameworks in the  
extremist scenes

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# FOREWORD

This analysis forms part of a research conducted under the operating grant of the “Program for Building Community Resilience against Violent Extremism and Radicalisation that Leads to Terrorism (VERLT) at the Nexus of Security and Development in the Republic of North Macedonia” implemented by “NEXUS - Civil Concept” and financially supported by the European Commission.

Many thanks to the research team and all the actors involved who contributed to the implementation of the activities resulting in this analysis.

We are also grateful to the experts from the academic, civil and public sector, as well as to the representatives of the religious communities, for their time as well as for their readiness and openness to cooperate and for the extremely valuable information on the specific topic that were of interest to the research.

The analysis should be the point of departure for finding ways to prevent and counter these phenomena, and at the same time it offers focused policy recommendations. We believe that with this analysis we will achieve the goal that was set and will encourage new research in this direction and on this particular issue that poses a real threat to security in our society.

Afrodita Musliu  
Programme Director



# BRIEF SUMMARY

Ethno-nationalism and political and religious extremism are one of the main threats to public security and a major challenge in the fight against violent extremism and terrorism, both for our country and for the Western Balkan countries. However, usually when it comes to extremist activity, the public debate focuses on people who have gone to foreign battlefields, returnees and recruiters, as a direct threat to public security. What is often less analysed are the various less visible, but potent extremist scenes that are driven by ethnic, religious and political diversity and that respectively influence the attitudes towards citizen equality and building a more tolerant and inclusive society.

Therefore, the key interest of this analysis is the frames in which the messages are constructed and in which the extremist scenes operate in the Republic of North Macedonia. The starting point of this research is the framing theory where the frames are the nexus between the political articulation that takes place at macro level and the insights at micro level and help us to understand the process of defining the extremist agendas.

The data for this research were obtained through in-depth interviews with representatives of public institutions, municipalities, academia, civil society and religious communities in the Republic of North Macedonia. Eleven men and four women were interviewed in the period between April and May 2020. The dominant opinion in North Macedonia is that there is political and ethno-nationalist extremism, but that highly extreme groups in the country are marginal since they form part of certain major political parties and do not have the power to take over the governance of the institutions. Ideologically driven extremism dominates over purely religious extremism, and within the social movements, they reflect identity issues, differences, especially ethnic, religious and linguistic differences, and are a recurrence of the processes of challenging the concept of nation-state and the distribution of resources and power between the ethnic groups.

The lack of political stability, social cohesion and integrated society, the perceived sense of unequal rights, poverty, large gap between the elites and the people (citizens), high level of corruption regardless of political affiliation and ideology, as well as the protracted entrepreneurial exploitation of the effects of such problems by the political elites, are the fundamental problems that give birth to extremism in our society.

Experts do not see a clear link between the violent extremism and ethno-nationalism, especially due to the internal political divisions within the largest ethnic communities, the Macedonian and the Albanian one. The polarisation of the major political parties within their ethnic blocs makes the internal stratification of the ethnic groups dominant, and makes the debate on the perceived status differences between ethnic communities less “lively”.

The messages of the extremist scenes are usually populist and/or apocalyptic and point out to superiority, domination over the others, and often make use of hate speech. The rhetoric intensifies in times of important political developments. Although the competent institutions may recognise them and be aware of their instrumentalisation, no activities are undertaken to prevent the damage from the entrepreneurial exploitation of these scenes.

Accompanying elements of the extremist scenes in North Macedonia are the media and the dehumanisation of the "Others", as well as the religion, its interpretation and the behaviour of the religious leaders. The media are indicated as important actors in sustaining the perceived conflict between the groups and in legitimising certain extremist narratives. The Internet and social media have further enabled the creation of so-called Twitter revolutions, fake news and alternative interpretations, violent groups, posts, hate speech, calls for lynching, and where due to anonymity and unlimited space for action, we have calls for violence.

In North Macedonia, one of the factors enabling the different scenes where polarising attitudes are nurtured to grow into hate groups, public stigmatisation of individuals and groups, and use of violence, is the policy of impunity for the flirting between the political and the ethnic sphere, and between the political and the religious sphere.

The eradication of ethno-nationalism in our country is almost impossible. Ethnic, religious and linguistic markers are dominant in the identity politics. What we probably need to learn is how to manage this diversity. Therefore, the potential of the extremist scenes to be a threat to public security depends most of all on the political and social climate that will be built in the coming period. The diversity of society should not and must not be seen as a threat. However, the instrumentalisation of diversity in creating "irreconcilable" differences between groups, influences on creating a discourse of exclusion and frames in which the "Others" are "culturally distant" and therefore, when deciding about the collective good, we can hardly reach a common ground and/or consensus.

The high level of functional illiteracy of the citizens, especially reflected in the media illiteracy to recognise fake news, is a threat to the political and security atmosphere in society.

Therefore, public institutions and municipalities are recommended to focus on prevention and on the local context, on multi-sectoral approach and vertical and horizontal coherence with other institutions and with civil society, discouraging hate speech and connecting with media and with the fight against fake news, aimed at pluralising the public sphere and integrating all issues, not only the ethnic ones, in the communication with the "Others".

The recommendations for civil society organisations are aimed at expanding the scope of action on the topic of security, violent extremism and terrorism, developing programmes for prevention, early detection and warning, and implementing them in cooperation with the local stakeholders, joining together in networks and platforms that will not only be correctors of hate speech, but also of the stigmatisation and discrimination of former members of extremist scenes, cooperating with the media, as well as developing and jointly implementing programmes for re-socialisation and rehabilitation of former members of extremist scenes through cooperation with public institutions and the academia.

For this to happen, it is necessary to strengthen the actors in the implementation of integrated education by including topics for critical thinking about the social reality and the political and ethno-nationalist extremism, the rule of law and a sense of justice and equality of all citizens, as well as creating independent self-organised scenes of citizens who basically aim at critically (re)thinking the reality outside the dichotomy<sup>1</sup> of ethnic, political and religious diversity and represent scenes of inclusion, solidarity and sharing of decision-making power and responsibility for the public good.

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<sup>1</sup> A dichotomy is the division of a whole into two parts, or halves, that do not overlap. In such a division, something that is part of one half can in no way be part of the other half.

# OVERVIEW OF DEFINITIONS

## EXTREMISM

Extremism is defined as motivated deviance from general behavioural norms and is assumed to stem from a shift from a balanced satisfaction of basic human needs afforded by moderation to a motivational imbalance wherein a given need dominates the others (Kruglanski et al., 2017, pp. 217-230).

## ETHNIC NATIONALISM OR ETHNO-NATIONALISM

is a term that describes a form of nationalist ideology according to which a nation is defined primarily or exclusively on the basis of ethnicity. The core theme of ethnic nationalists is that “nations are defined by a shared heritage, which usually includes a common language, a common faith, and a common ethnic ancestry” (Muller & Jerry, 2008, pp. 9-14).

## POLITICAL EXTREMISM

is the behaviour and opinion on social issues that is on the verge of or contrary to the legal, social and cultural norms of a society. According to Đorić (2016), its key feature is the use of violence, or propensity for violence (which does not always have to be executed).

## VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Violent extremism refers to the beliefs and actions of people who use ideologically motivated violence to pursue radical ideological, religious or political attitudes (Government of the RNM, 2018).

## COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Proactive actions to counter efforts by violent extremists to radicalise, recruit and mobilise followers to engage in violent acts, as well as address issues through violent extremism and radicalisation (OSCE, 2018).

## RADICALISATION

can also be explained as increasing extremity of beliefs, feelings and behaviours in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defence of the ingroup (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2018, p. 416). The process of accepting violence is crucial. If one were to describe the process by which the individual becomes a violent extremist, the term **radicalisation that leads to violence** would be more appropriate than violent extremism that focuses on ideologically motivated recourse to violence. In the context of our research, we will use the term **radicalisation** to describe the process in which a person develops extreme views or behaviours to legitimise the use of violence.

## FORMS OF VIOLENT RADICALISATION

### Violent right-wing radicalisation:

A form of radicalisation associated with fascism, racism and ultra-nationalism. Violent defence of racial, ethnic or national identity, linked to radical hostility against state authorities, non-majority communities, immigrants and/or left-wing political groups.

### Violent religious radicalisation:

A form of radicalisation in relation to the political interpretation of religion implies the defence of religious identity - by violent means when considered to be endangered (international conflict, foreign policy). These violent radicalisations can have their roots in all religions.

### Violent left-wing radicalisation:

This form of radicalisation focuses mainly on the demands of anti-capitalism and transformation of the political system in order to put an end to social inequalities by use of violent means.

### Violent radicalism motivated by a specific issue:

Anti-abortion groups, anti-gay/anti-feminist movements or ultra-individualists and independent extremist movements (Music, 2018).

## RADICALISATION THAT LEADS TO TERRORISM

The dynamic process whereby an individual comes to accept terrorist violence as a possible, perhaps even legitimate, course of action. This may eventually (but not necessarily) lead this person to advocate, act in support of, or to engage in, terrorism (OSCE TNTD & ODIHR, 2014).

## TERRORISM

Illegal use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in pursuit of political goals (National Strategy of the Republic of North Macedonia for Countering Violent Extremism, 2018-2022).

Violent extremism and terrorism are essentially about rejecting the democratic values of tolerance, respect, inclusion and diversity.

# INTRODUCTION

Ethno-nationalism and political and religious extremism are one of the main threats to public security and a major challenge in the fight against violent extremism and terrorism, both for our country and for the Western Balkan countries. However, usually when it comes to extremist activity, the public debate focuses on people who have gone to foreign battlefields, returnees and recruiters, who are considered a direct threat to public security. What is often less analysed are the various less visible, but potent extremist scenes that are driven by ethnic, religious, and political diversity and that can be present on both sides of the spectrum — left and right — and respectively influence the attitude towards citizen equality and building a more tolerant and inclusive society. Social media and the Internet have changed the way extremist scenes are being formed, recruited, mobilised and made visible. Extremism today is not just a matter of public security, but also a social challenge that calls for designing prevention mechanisms against risk factors that allow individuals/groups/communities to become vulnerable and susceptible to indoctrination with extremist views. So, what kind of extremist scenes are there in the Republic of North Macedonia, what are their main action frameworks and main messages that mobilise?

The issue of radicalisation and adoption of extremist views is also important for building and maintaining democratic and resilient societies. Certain forms of extremism may not be a direct threat to public security, and therefore not on the political agenda. However, the insufficient ways and means of counteracting the amount of misinformation revealed by the polarising narratives of various mobilised extremist scenes are seen as a weakness in deconstructing the messages that shape these scenes, calling for violence, and threatening the process of building a tolerant and inclusive society.

Therefore, **this research is focused on:**

- Analysing the extremist scenes in the Republic of North Macedonia, with special emphasis on the messages of the scenes that point out to extreme opinions on the social movements and call for violence;
- Drafting recommendations for addressing extremism through the policies of the country, education, security, building community resilience through a clear analysis of the messages towards which the extremist scenes are converging.

# METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This analysis provides answers to several key questions about the extremist scenes in the Republic of North Macedonia, namely:

- Which main frames are particularly tempting for the extremist scenes and have the potential to mobilise and attract members, voters and new groups?
- How the main messages are framed and constructed, i.e. what is the rhetoric of effects of (non-)acting on extremist scenes?
- How can these key messages be deconstructed and how can community resilience to the potency of extremist scenes be built?

The starting point of this research was the framing theory. The framing theory is a commonly used approach in the analysis of social movements and social mobilisation. According to Elgenius & Rydgrenb (2019, pp. 583-602), the framing theory compared to the concept of ideology can be more productive in analysing the strategic steps of the social actors, especially in the context of North Macedonia where there is no clear ideological boundary of the political actors. Ideology is considered to be a more stable, coherent and comprehensive system of beliefs and political assertions that determine the positions of the political and social actors, unlike the frames that are changeable, not always stable and not always used coherently by the political and social actors. The political ideology in our country proves to be an insufficient mechanism for political demarcation of the left and the right. Thus, it may not always be a direct indicator of the political positioning of individuals, groups, and parties. Even more often, slogans and symbols are a better indicator of the position of the individuals and groups in relation to ethnic and political extremism. Frames more often than ideology itself speak of the strategic choices of social actors in terms of interpreting reality. “Frames provide a link between political articulation, played out at the macro level, and cognition at the micro level, and help us understand the process through which views may shift in ways that benefit an extremist agenda. This, in turn, is important for understanding the development of a deeper ideological attachment towards extremist groups”, point out Elgenius & Rydgrenb (2019, pp. 583-602). According to Snow & Benford (1992, pp. 133–155) framing is an active, process-oriented phenomenon that involves an actor and an intent at the level of constructing reality.<sup>2</sup> The glossary used by the research is given at the beginning of this analysis.

The data for this research have been obtained through in-depth interviews with representatives of public institutions, municipalities, academia, civil society and religious communities in the Republic of North Macedonia. A total of 15 people were interviewed or completed a written questionnaire. They were selected based on their position in the institution/organisation, i.e. the long-running experience working on the topics of ethno-nationalism, extremism, social movements, security and other related topics. Eleven men and four women were interviewed between April and May 2020. Of these, three are representatives of public institutions, one is a representative of a municipality, five are representatives of the academia, four are from the civil society sector and two of them are representatives of the religious communities. In the interviews, a semi-structured questionnaire was used that covered four segments of

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<sup>2</sup> The basis of framing is Erving Goffman (1974) according to whom the frame is an interpretive scheme that simplifies and unites social reality by selectively emphasising and coding events, objects, situations, experiences and sequences of events within current or past events. That is, to “locate, experience, identify and name” events in social life.

discussion: the context of extremist scenes in the country, the ethno-nationalism as a threat, the political extremism as a threat, and policies and solutions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The list of interviewees is known to the research team and is not disclosed in this report due to the sensitivity of the discussion and the period of publication (parliamentary elections in July 2020). Annex 1 shows the demographic data of the respondents involved.

The analysis, in theory, was aimed at identifying the main frames of extremist scenes in the country. Through qualitative data obtained from in-depth interviews with selected key actors, the analysis points out to the collective frames that: (a) attribute guilt for the perceived social problems by identifying persons, social groups or structures believed to have caused various real or perceived social problems (**diagnostic framing**); (b) provide reasons and justification to the public and to individual groups and individuals to support the political cause (**motivational framing**); and (c) propose a main course of action (**prognostic framing**).

The research was conducted amid severe restrictions on social contacts due to the Covid-19 pandemic in the country and it led to the use of different methods for obtaining data from different respondents (answering - in writing/online interviews). Also, some of the respondents have had previous contact with the researchers, and others have not. Thus, the conditions for all the respondents were not the same. Due to the specific impact of the restrictions in terms of remote working, the research also had a small sample size, which prevents comparative analysis against the demographic data of the respondents, and instead only allows the possibility for determining tendencies. Therefore, the possibility of generalisation is limited. The sample in the research, although heterogeneous (purposefully composed of respondents representing different sectors in society), is still appropriate and the respondents are selected based on their expertise on the topic and it does not tend to be representative. Therefore, it cannot be argued that it is not systematically different from the rest of the population. However, the purpose of this analysis is not to provide the main views and tendencies on the topic of extremism, but to allow an in-depth insight into the actors, factors and frameworks of action and mobilisation of the extremist scenes. The acquisition of data in qualitative research is guided by the principle of data saturation, i.e. repetition of data with each subsequent respondent. This allows the sample to be defined as sufficient. Additionally, the involvement of representatives from different sectors allows us the opportunity to draw conclusions through the different perspectives of the respondents.

This analysis makes sure that one group or community is not identified as a “risk community” based on a shared identity with violent extremist groups. In such cases, a clear conflict arises between respect for the democratic principles of pluralism, respect for the rule of law and human rights, and the policies of states on how to achieve the goals of national security. Responses to extremist scenes based on assumptions about identity marks, such as ethnicity and religion, are erroneous, discriminatory, and ultimately counterproductive to the purpose of building community resilience.



# MAPPING EXTREMIST SCENES IN NORTH MACEDONIA

## A look at the history before the independence of the country

The Republic of North Macedonia is part of the scene of extremist ideologies which, regardless of whether they are based on religion, ethnicity or politics, essentially faces two challenges. On the one hand, they promote the supremacy of one group over the others by frequently using violent methods for practicing and spreading the idea and for mobilisation, and on the other hand, these extremist ideologies oppose the process of building a more tolerant and inclusive society, i.e. the coexistence of groups in a culturally and ethnically diverse society.

Extremism, in its various forms, including violence, is a product of historical, political, economic and social circumstances. The influence of regional relations and global power politics is also inevitable. Growing social inequality, high unemployment rate, or poverty, especially among a given segment of the population, further on, the perception of injustice, human rights violations, exclusion from the social and political life that can take place along ethnic and religious lines, and widespread corruption, are considered to be important instigators of extremism, especially in its violent form. Unsuccessful political transitions, weak institutions, failure to enforce laws and absence of the rule of law, as well as control over public institutions, are a fertile ground for violent extremism. Weak states thus create opportunities for the physical congregation of extremist groups.

The Republic of North Macedonia is no exception to these developments. Since its independence, the country has continuously struggled to create an appropriate response to the ethnic groups' demands for participation in social life, including in the political decision-making processes, and against important segments of the community that have consistently opposed the principles of shared power and have rejected the multicultural reality in society. The dynamics of the ethnic relations have been used by the political elites to position themselves on the main issue: the nation-state and the practice of multiculturalism. Thus, ethnic and political extremism in our country are interdependent. Reinforcement of the extreme positions of the ethnic communities in respect of sharing the state, the resources and the opportunities, is directly translated into political extremism for domination of one group over another and for a discourse of competitiveness and illegitimacy of demands defined as "us" versus "them", with a tendency for certain political reasons to become ethnically intolerant. For that reason, ethnic and political extremism should be viewed from the aspect of their inter-connection and dialectics.

Why is it important to address ethnic and political extremism, and not just violent extremism and terrorism, in terms of the development of extremist scenes? Mostly because the messages of the extremist scenes and movements are framed and constructed by underlining the ethnic and cultural homogeneity, the political supremacy of one group over another and the history linked to the ethnic and cultural past of the dominant group, as well as the conflict between the two largest ethnic groups (the Macedonian and the Albanian). These are the main characteristics of ethnic and political extremism, and especially in the context of North Macedonia, where there are no clear boundaries between right and left extremism. Political and ethnic extremism mutually encourage and reinforce each other. Ethnic diversity is often used in the political rhetoric of irreconcilable differences exercised by right-wing political scenes, and the political polarisation additionally does not contribute to bringing them to reason and turning them away from adopting extreme social positions.

**Ethno-nationalism and  
political extremism  
in the context of violent extremism:  
the identity as a unifying term  
for ethnicity, religion and ideology**

North Macedonia is one of the successors of the former Yugoslavia. In 1991, the country declared independence and initiated the process of building a nation-state with a majority political system within a liberal democratic framework (Maleska, 2013, pp. 1-27). In parallel with the process of building a nation-state, the country's transition was accompanied by political, economic and social transformations. A multi-party political system and liberal market values were introduced, as well as a social transformation of the state organisation and value system (Kolozova, Panov and Milchevski, 2010, pp. 1-27). At the social level, these transformations have resulted not only in a change of the dominant ideological paradigm, but also in a process of new identification of the state and the nation, outside of the socialist, fraternal concept. Legally and practically, since 1991, almost nobody has disputed that the Macedonians, who make up 64.2 per cent of the population, as the majority group, are the only legitimate political community. Albanians, Turks, Roma, Vlachs, Serbs, and Bosniaks enjoyed equal rights and responsibilities as the majority group, but in practice, their experiences point out to difficulties in terms of equal access to the political life, labour market, education, social and cultural life (Pajaziti, 2005; Maleska, 2013, pp. 1-27). The split of values, the confused identity and the fear of the future engendered collective paranoia that was target of populist manipulations and nationalist communitarianism (Frckovski, 2000). Pearson (2001) points out that changes in inter-ethnic relations may change the way nationalist discourses address the demands for public display of the ethno-cultural symbols of smaller ethnic communities.

The process of change of the power relations between the ethnic communities has proven to be a painful process in North Macedonia. To balance and accommodate has been constitutively embedded in the new political agreement between the country's ethnic groups and reflects the ideological and political orientation of the ethnic elites and the government's policy towards interethnic relations. "They (the political elites) have the greatest influence in the struggles between the dominant and the subordinate groups to shape and reshape events and identities" (Pearson, 2001). In its internal affairs, the country struggled with on-going misunderstandings between the two dominant ethnic groups, the Macedonians and the Albanians, and eventually these turned into separate ethno-nationalisms. The first one, that of the Macedonians, defined the country as the ownership of Macedonians based on the principle of *jus soli*, the principle of blood and kinship. The second one, that of the Albanians, called for revision of the mono-ethnic state ownership in order to include the Albanians who consider themselves a sub-nation. A clear social polarisation and an ethnicised public sphere are the result of such divergent processes that push the country to function more as a bi-national than as a multicultural state. Those ethnic communities that were neither Macedonians nor Albanians were forced to take sides in order to achieve political goals of representation (Trajkovski, 2005, pp. 5-13).

In 2001, these competing nationalist visions escalated in a several-month period of violent clashes between the Albanians and the Macedonian army and police, with a relatively low death toll on both sides. Violence ended with the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) amending the Constitution to affirm promotion of the rights and status of the ethnic communities living in the country (OFA as a document uses the term ethnic communities instead of ethnic groups) and the

acceptance of multicultural values of society in order to transform the state from a nation-state owned by the Macedonian majority into a state that gives almost equal space to the other ethnic groups, i.e. to be installed as a multi-ethnic society (Биебер, 2008, стр. 11-13). The agreement managed to restore peace and trust to the level of providing public support for practicing policies of multiculturalism. While it retained the unitary character of the country, the focus of ethno-cultural expressions was strongly linked to the process of identity formation and representation, and resulted in “politicisation of ethnicity” (Glazer, 1983). Over time, the strengthening of ethnic identity in the public sphere has increased mistrust and antagonism between the ethnic communities.

The ethnic nationalism takes place in the context of serious economic challenges for the country where over a quarter of the population lives below the poverty threshold. For decades, the country has consistently faced high levels of unemployment. According to the State Statistical Office (2020), a record-high level of unemployment was registered in 2005, i.e. 37.3%, with a tendency to decrease in recent years, i.e. 20.7% in 2018 and 17.3% in 2019. Data showing the unemployment rate among different ethnic groups are lacking, but the data from the Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia (2020) indicate that the municipalities of Tetovo and Kumanovo have the highest number of registered active job seekers (13,192 people in Tetovo and 12,372 people in Kumanovo), places where the Albanian ethnic community mostly lives.

Over the years, the effect of ethno-nationalism has resulted in ethnic groups leading parallel lives in the scenario “together but separate”, i.e. segregation in all spheres of social life, schools, neighbourhoods, socialisation venues, etc.

## What unites the extremist scenes?

**A unifying term for the mobilisation and the extremist scenes is having propaganda widely available on social media and having hate crimes**

North Macedonia has not faced public manifestation of far-right extremism. The threat may be more visible in situations where there is an increase in right-wing scenes with members who have been actively involved in threats and violence against journalists, politicians and other persons who do not share the same political views. Far-right extremism in Europe is “fed” by the increase in the number of immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees who are seen as a threat to the local ethnicity.

With a few exceptions, such as the anti-NATO protests by the left-wing movements, North Macedonia has not seen a visible demonstration of far-left extremism. The left wing of extremism is usually less associated with violence or is less perceived as a threat to the social order, unlike far-right extremism, which is why, on policy level, fewer resources are allocated to monitoring and preventing left-wing extremism. It is expected that an increase in far-right extremism will also mobilise an increase in far-left extremism. Such grouping can pose a threat to security, but also to communities that need to build resilience against extreme social positions, especially against those that call for violence.

Nevertheless, North Macedonia is facing a public manifestation of political extremism and ethno-nationalism, and their more or less violent forms. The events from the past five years, such as the Colourful Revolution, the boycott of the Referendum on the change of the constitutional name, the protests for “Common Macedonia”, are just a few of them. These scenes are united by:

- Lack of tolerance for narratives that challenge their belief system, also associated with violent disrespect for the civil discourse, culture, scientific or rational thought, human rights, the rule of law, and the traditional and modern embodiment of law and authority;

- Use of religious, ethnic or political symbols;
- Equating the nation with the state - rejecting the existing borders or glorifying the nation-state associated with a rhetoric of domination of one group over the “Others”;
- Setting individual or group goals in nihilistic, millennial or apocalyptic terms, rather than as achievable political goals;
- Trivialisation of violence and the impact of global culture (modern versus traditional cultural values);
- Gender discrimination and stereotyping of gender roles, especially by equating women with the idea of homeland.

# WHAT DO THEORY AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH SAY ABOUT POLITICAL EXTREMISM AND ETHNO-NATIONALISM?

## **("Profiles" of people, dynamic process of radicalisation, violent actions in extremist scenes)**

A reasonable starting point, at least for Western democracies, in defining extremism, is that it: “[Extremism] refers to political ideologies that oppose the core values and principles of democracy and universal human rights that can be applied to any ideology that advocates racial, ethnic or religious supremacy, as well as the methods through which actors on the social and political scene attempt to realise their aims, and this usually happens through disregard for the life, liberty and human rights of others” (Neuman, 2010, pp. 7-36).

In modern Western democratic contexts, extremism usually implies four categories: right-wing, left-wing, religious, and so-called “single issue extremism”, such as animal rights or the environment. Radical right-wing extremism, as well as left-wing communist systems, and religious extremism, are responsible for various and numerous human rights and freedom violations. Although there are significant differences between these ideologies, political psychologists point out that extreme left-wing and extreme right-wing ideologies share similar psychological driving mechanisms, such as distrust and critical attitude towards the political system and its expected performance (Krouwel et al., 2017, pp. 435-462). Today, the success of extremist movements and the support for far-left and far-right political parties is being interpreted as a voice of protest against the elitist and established parties and government officials as the embodiment of corruption and injustice. The political cynicism and distrust of institutions, which usually increase in times of economic crisis, as well as the growing importance of alternative (even conflicting) dimensions of division (especially by politicising multiculturalism, feminism, the environment, migration), create political opportunities and good performance of the extremist movements and parties (Krouwel et al., 2017, pp. 435-462).

However, mainly the right-wing movements are those that capitalise on the distrust in the institutions, especially of the political actors who failed to resolve the biggest problems of the post-industrial (in our case, post-transitional) life, the alienation of the citizens from the political processes, the politicisation of issues, such as ethnic diversity, “majority-minority” relations and the perceived attack on identity. All this contributes to an understanding among individuals that the old frameworks are not effective in comprehending the new power relations and context of living, which is why the acceptance of a new, alternative interpretation is required (Rydgreen, 2005, pp. 413-437). This new interpretation, often framed as such by right-wing extremist movements, today is less based on the traditional socio-economic frames and more on ethnic, identity frames (Rydgreen, 2005, pp. 413-437). The victory of the socio-cultural (identity) issues over the socio-economic divisions also means expanding the possibilities for creating alternative frames of interpretation of right-wing movements.

In 2018 and 2019, terrorism, right-wing and ethno-nationalism, and separatist terrorist attacks were noted as the biggest security threats to the European Union, with a tendency for increasing left-wing anarchist activism in several countries (EUPOL, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2020; European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2019). In their essence, these and other extremist scenes, which are usually hierarchical, but also often legitimise violence and are militant, are seen as threats to democratic societies. Not only because of the opposition to the ethnic and religious differences in society, but also to policies of multiculturalism, citizenry and social inclusion that support diversity on different grounds (ethnicity, culture, religion, sexual orientation, etc.).

Ethnicity and political ideology are often used as determinants of far-right and religious extremism. Experiences from countries in Europe and the United States focused on far-right and religious extremism suggest a correlation between growing populism and ethno-nationalism. However, today we cannot talk about a stable profile of people who are susceptible to involvement and mobilisation in extremist scenes. Therefore, extremism should not be understood as a state, but rather as a dynamic process (Bjørge, 2011, pp. 277–285). The discussion on extremism should in fact be conducted in terms of the wider economic, political and cultural context of our society, but also in relation to the conflict of identities due to the simultaneous interaction of the local and the global (Abbas, 2017, pp. 54–61). What kind of developmental pathways take place in such processes of adaptation and mediation (especially at identity level) is an important issue both for science and for the policies for countering extremism, radicalisation and building community resilience.

A common feature of political extremism is the defining of a simplistic perception of the complex social reality, with strong self-confidence, with biased information from sources that confirm their frame and rejection or ignoring of those who offer a more nuanced view of reality. Also, the rigid closeness and ideologically driven belief that social issues have simple solutions, which these scenes offer, additionally offers or is translated into easier dealing with feelings of uncertainty and fear, as well as constructing a more comprehensible and predictable understanding of the world (Fernbach et al. 2013, pp. 939–946). Taking extreme political positions is also associated with insufficient understanding and unjustified trust in the knowledge of the mechanism by which policies define and govern our lives. Generating simplistic, simple understanding of policies highlights the illusion of understanding and leads to the acceptance of more moderate political positions, forcing individuals to confront their ignorance (Fernbach et al. 2013, pp. 939–946).

Then who are the people who are more susceptible to accepting extremist frames and in what situations? The usual approach in theory is to identify the risk factors (Bouhana et al. 2011). This approach distinguishes between **direct reasons** that influence people to adopt extremist views and engage in extremist scenes, as well as **indirect reasons** that influence the emergence of direct reasons for engaging in extremist scenes and accepting extremist ideology. The literature generally distinguishes three groups of risk factors: (1) factors originating from the wider environment; (2) individual pressure/inclination factors (pull factors), and (3) factors of exposure in the local context (push factors). The wider environment, firstly, encompasses contextual factors, such as global structural, political, social and economic processes, beyond the range of individuals or even individual states, such as segregation and overpopulation, which transferred into the local dynamics can be effectuated into unemployment and structural discrimination, and ultimately result in a feeling of mistrust, dissatisfaction, and (perceived) marginalisation (Coolsaet, 2015).

Individuals differ in the way they perceive and define these broader circumstances that influence their attitudes and actions, as well as in relation to the socio-psychological mechanisms that emerge in response to these circumstances, such as perceived injustice, perceived group threat and perceived uncertainties, and relate the individual to a broader context and determine how individuals interpret certain social and personal circumstances (Doosje et al., 2012, pp. 253–268). Further on, the socio-psychological mechanisms determine the position of the individual in relation to the others in the same group (Bjørge, 2011, pp. 277–285), but also the relationship between groups, where the perception of denial of certain opportunities to the group due to another group emerges as a factor of radicalisation, i.e. acceptance of alternative interpretations (Moghaddam, 2015, pp. 161–169).

Some distinguished individual pressure factors, such as certain personality traits that make some individuals more prone to certain experiences, are: impulsiveness, frustration, hatred, anger, and fear that can affect a person's behaviour and willingness to accept the narratives of extremist groups and the involvement in extremist actions (Bjørge, 2011, pp. 277–285; Doosje, 2012, pp. 253–268). At the same time, some psychological disorders (such as depression) may develop in connection with or as a result of the process of radicalisation (for example, due to isolation from primary relationships). However, research focusing on individual factors generally addresses those disorders that precede radicalisation and are often associated with other structures and group levels of mechanisms (Vergani et al., 2018).

Some known factors of exposure in the local context include: (1) attraction to the ideology (narrative) of an extremist group that claims to resolve certain issues and meet certain basic social and psychological needs (Bjørge, 2011, pp. 277–285); (2) ideological recognition (Silke, 2008, pp. 99–123) and (3) the significant “others” from the social environment, such as friends or family, who often establish the first connection of the individual with the extremist ideology and extremist group (Bjørge, 2011, pp. 277–285). Certain traumatic events in personal life or experienced violence (either by a group or against the group to which he/she belongs) may accelerate the process of identifying and engaging in extremist scenes. Such situations and processes are characterised by cognitive distortion: “all or nothing”, i.e. when the person sees life in black and white, has rigid perceptions that are not positioned on a continuum of values, but are rather seen as only two extremes, i.e. the best - the worst (Silke, 2008 pp. 99–123; Bjørge, 2011, pp. 277–285). Psychological anxiety/stress reinforces extremist beliefs and support of radical movements, dividing society into two possible directions of the political spectrum. The direction, left or right, depends on the dynamics of the cultural, political, and historical factors that determine whether the ideological influences that link radicalism to nationalism in a given community are predominantly on the political right, or on the political left, or on both ends of the political spectrum (Prooijen et al., 2019, pp. 159–163).

Contextual factors usually build on the experience and perceived experience and feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the individual's personal life, society and/or certain public policies. Although ideological arguments are the most common post-hoc justification/rationalisation for joining an extremist group, radicalisation is mainly rooted in socially-oriented contextualised elements emanating from the wider environment. The ideological recognition can direct the choice to a particular group, but in most cases the specific ideological framework is adopted only after recruitment (Silke, 2008, pp. 99–123).

To put it simply, vulnerable are those who are susceptible to a simple worldview and an identity crisis that in a simple and clear way provide/offer answers for the extremist groups. Basically, radical and even violent extremist movements seem to offer three things: (1) answers to existential life questions; (2) a political activist response to injustice; and (3) a sense of home and belonging. This matches three important grounds for (violent) radicalisation, such as: (1) the need for meaning and belonging; (2) response to (perceived) injustice, and (3) the need for social/economic/political involvement (Buijs, 2006, pp. 1-17). Thus, four profiles of persons are constructed, who are more easily susceptible to radicalisation, i.e. identity seekers, justice seekers, sensation seekers and significance seekers (Macdougall et al., 2018, pp. 277 -285).

However, most risk factors are common to many individuals in today's rapidly changing societies, only a few of whom will engage in extremist scenes or accept violence as a legitimate response to social change. This suggests that risk factors are not sufficient to explain the individual's involvement in extremist scenes (Neuman, 2006, pp. 749-772). Therefore, it is important to identify and understand the local instigators, as well as the fact that these factors can vary considerably from one context to another and much more than just a revolt of the smaller communities towards the dominant groups. Aspects such as identity formation and identity crisis, self-realisation, or social position of the individual are not issues that are important only to non-majority groups, but rather also to the majority, especially in the dynamics of change of power relations. Therefore, the extremism today is not only a matter of “acquiring rights” by non-majority communities, but also a resistance by the majority groups to the growing heterogeneity, especially visible in the form of ethnic and religious diversity of the community, often seen through the prism of the “nation”. Today, more studies highlight the exposure instead of the propensity in diagnosing the risk factors for involvement in extremist scenes (Abu-Nimber, 2018, p. 5).

It is important to note that radical beliefs at the left or right end of the political spectrum are not an indication that violent extremism or terrorism is inevitably developing. Many people who have radical ideas never engage in terrorist acts (Neuman, 2000, pp. 749-772). Even those who engage in violent extremism and claim to have a “cause” are not ideologues or profound believers in the extremist narrative. Some only have a superficial knowledge or commitment to the extremist narrative, but there are other reasons that have drawn them into the group. Ideology and action are sometimes related, but not always. Thus, radical beliefs are a facilitator - or at least a necessary precursor - to violent extremism and terrorism. And the difference between ideology and action needs to be understood (Borum, 2012, pp. 7-36).

*According to which criteria a certain extremist ideology becomes a threat to public security?*

The way in which a threat is defined has profound implications on how this phenomenon is understood and at the same time, how we address groups and members. This is a question that needs to be answered by acquiring knowledge about the dynamic process of change from radicalisation to violent extremism, or as described in the metaphor of a staircase and a pyramid, where at the lowest floors we talk about radicalism, then violent extremism and at the upper floors about terrorism (Moghaddam, 2005, pp. 161-169). The question of cognition often leads us to generalisations. And although in this field, creating profiles or a list of factors does not help, still, profiling the dimensions, processes and pathways that people who become part of and later leave the radical scenes go through, allows for the identification of possible preventive actions, in particular, deconstruction of the recruitment messages and the processes of radicalisation, and thus moving towards the construction of new narratives of inclusion and belonging.

Widespread access to the Internet, online media and social networks make the work of the institutions and local communities more difficult. They blurred the traditional dividing line between the creator and the consumer of extremist content, enabled the emergence of more local leaders and creators, as well as a platform for “existence” of groups for which there is social inadmissibility for them to be represented in the physical public space (Mattsson & Johansson, 2018, p. . 34-69). Online media and the “virtual life” of extremist scenes is particularly appealing to those seeking justice and status (Macdougall et al., 2018, pp. 1-14)

What needs to be done is not only to try to understand what people who become part of extremist scenes think about the complex social reality in which we live, and how they ended up thinking in that particular way that excludes and simplifies, but also to see how they move from thought to action. Unfortunately, this cannot be achieved through a single theory, discipline or research framework. The relationships and dynamics at the micro (individual) and macro (social/cultural) level, even in the broader picture of global movements and their translation into the local context, need to be comprehended in order to better understand the phenomenon of political extremism (Veldhuis & Staun, 2009 ).



# WHAT DOES THIS ANALYSIS INDICATE?

**Diagnostic frame:** *Which individuals, groups, movements or structures (the survey uses the term “scenes”) can be identified as a threat to public security in the Republic of North Macedonia? Which actors, factors, events, relations and methods in the extremist scenes form part of the group of recognised “culprits”?*

Organised crime (various types of illicit trade), violent extremism through terrorism preparatory acts, recruitment, radicalisation and socio-political processes (fragmentation and division of society intertwined with corrupt activities, hate speech and hybrid threats (spreading disinformation, propaganda, cyber-attacks) are recognised as key threats to public security in the country. As one expert says: “Extremism has several manifestations or reflections that reach quite dangerous dimensions when combined with the structure of society, the institutions, the chronic problems with the institutions, etc. And in that sense, we do not have a problem with just one type of extremism, such as violent extremism as a possible stage towards terrorism, but we have several of them”. Among them, we can clearly recognise: violent political extremism, religious extremism and violent extremism in sports, as part of the political engineering and political culture of governance.

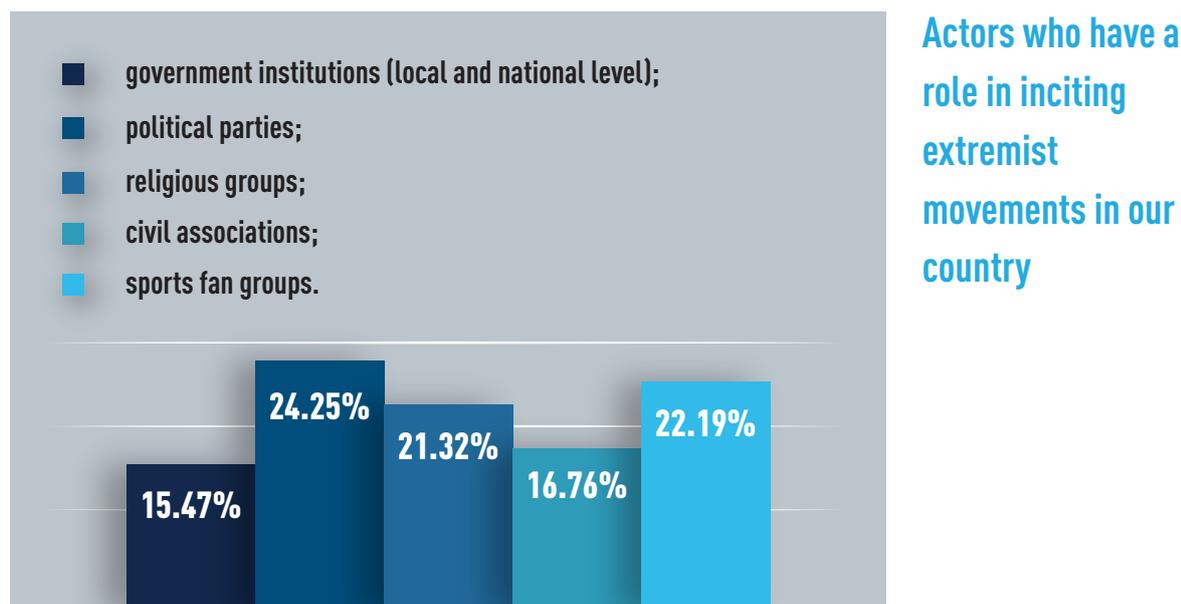
Experts agree that in North Macedonia we are talking about ideologically coloured extremism that is not reflected in the spectrum of left wing and right wing on the action platform of the political parties; however, within the social movements it reflects identity issues, differences, especially ethnic, religious and linguistic ones, and are a recurrence of the processes of challenging the concept of nation-state and the distribution of resources and power between the ethnic groups.

Political instability and the instrumentalisation of the diversity of society, especially ethnic and religious diversity in the discourse of the struggle for resources and power (ethno-nationalism) is a characteristic of our society that makes it vulnerable to extremist scenes that try to respond to the real and/or perceived social problems. The diversity of society should not and must not be seen as a threat. However, the instrumentalisation of diversity in creating “irreconcilable” differences between groups influences on the formation of a discourse of exclusion and frames in which the “Others” are “culturally distant” and therefore, we can hardly reach a common ground and/or consensus in deciding about the collective good, as experts say.

This research does not qualify patriotism and the need to defend one's community as a priori harmful. Affiliation and solidarity with the community inspires social movements, and the free demonstration of opinions is a hallmark of a healthy democracy. The existence of a debate about the values and actions of the social scenes is necessary in comprehending the development processes of change that take place within the groups (across generations, age, and target groups). The experts also agree that, at least in the past five years, we have witnessed social movements that led to policy changes, a clear disagreement with the value orientation of education, the social climate, political power, and even a shift in the methods of political governance towards participatory and inclusive governance. What in North Macedonia allows the various scenes where polarising attitudes are nurtured to grow into hate groups, public stigmatisation of individuals and groups, and use of violence, is the policy of impunity for the flirting between the political and the ethnic sphere and between the political and the religious sphere. Ethnic and religious “entrepreneurs” facilitate the action of informal scenes, outside of the formal actors (political parties, official religious communities) and where individuals are ideologically shaped and radicalised towards extreme political beliefs and the use of violence is legitimised. Social media only provided “life” to these scenes in a relatively unregulated and uncensored public space, outside of the formal communication action of the institutions-citizens (traditional public space). One of the experts allocates indirect responsibility for inciting extremist narratives to both the civil society sector and

public intellectuals because “public intellectuals are analogously divided into the main public matrices, in terms of the narrative, on one side or the other. The responsibility is greater and more absolute for anyone who is a public intellectual, writer or anyone who goes public and speaks on certain topics because they are the creators of pluralism of opinions, have a responsibility to promote a discourse of overcoming prejudices and stereotypes about the other, of overcoming the dichotomy of “us” and “them”. In the absence of such pluralism of opinions, that is what happens. The two dominant options use their narratives to gain political points in their constituencies. This is where this narrative becomes stronger”.

**Graph 1. Expert opinion tendencies expressed in percentages concerning the actors who have a role in inciting extremist movements.**



Most experts (24.25%) believe that the political parties have the greatest role in inciting extremist movements. According to them, next in the list are the sports fan groups (22.19%), then the religious groups (21.32%) and the civil associations (16.76%). According to experts, the smallest role in inciting extremist movements is played by the government institutions at local and national level (15.47%). In addition to these actors, one expert points out to the media as instigators of extremist movements by spreading fake news.

The high level of functional illiteracy of the citizens, especially reflected in media illiteracy to recognise fake news, is a threat to the political and security atmosphere in society. “We have the mentality of seeking something that will confirm our view. We are looking for a fact and we do not intend to investigate anything. We start with a certain prejudice, which we only seek to confirm. And anything that does not suit us, we cognitively reject. And anything that suits us at least a little, we twist and accept. This means that any foreign service can sell us whatever story they want. We are an anti-intellectual society prone to obscure theories, conspiracy theories, simplifications,” said one expert. These characteristics of the political culture allow for extreme scenes and populism as a direct reflection of the constant, but not always productive, critique of society.

Experts do not see a clear link between violent extremism and ethno-nationalism, especially due to the internal political divisions within the largest ethnic communities, the Macedonian and the Albanian one. The polarisation of the major political parties within their ethnic blocs makes the internal stratification of the ethnic groups dominant (labelling them as “patriots” and “traitors”), and makes the discussion on the perceived status differences between ethnic communities less “lively”.

Numerous events from the recent past are recognised as events that had the potential to mobilise people in extremist scenes. The immigration crisis of 2015 is an external factor that got framed in a certain extremist form of internal resistance, through civil self-organisation<sup>3</sup>. This topic is still exploited for political purposes through diagnostic messages that: *“migrants will be present in your neighbourhood, in our neighbourhood, will go to school with our children, will take our jobs, migrant settlement means an increase in crime and violence rates”* (Radio MOF, 2017; Radio Free Europe, 2017). The publication of the “bombs” [wiretapped conversations] and the so-called Colourful Revolution<sup>i</sup>, the Kumanovo events in Divo Naselje<sup>ii</sup>, bilingualism and the so-called Tirana platform<sup>iii</sup>, the signing of the Agreement with Greece<sup>iv</sup>, the referendum and the change of the country's name<sup>v</sup>, the social movements “I Protest”, “I Boycott” and “For Common Macedonia”<sup>vi</sup> and especially the intrusion in the Parliament on April 27<sup>vii</sup>, 2017 are emphasised as events with the greatest potential for mobilisation of the citizens and radicalisation of the political expression. Less frequently mentioned are the Smilkovsko Lake event<sup>viii</sup>, the Treaty of Good Neighbourliness with Bulgaria<sup>ix</sup> and the call for a “de-Sorosization of society”<sup>x</sup> that took place on the eve of the 2016 parliamentary elections. Two particularly comparable events of political polarisation are the Colourful Revolution and the movement “For Common Macedonia”. Both movements were massive, in terms of popularity among the citizens, and despite the differences in motives, inclusiveness and methods of achieving goals, they had the common element of delegitimising the governance with, to some extent, violent elements (attack on institutions). Nevertheless, the important difference was that the Colourful Revolution did not culminate with its own “27th of April” despite the tense atmosphere in the movement. The event of the “27th of April” is especially important because it sought to disguise as invisible the political abuse of patriotic sentiments and where the intra-ethnic radicalisation was more frightening than the interethnic antagonism. Experts agree that the event of the “27th of April” has made the political entrepreneurs of the centre-right or of the right to become aware of the possibilities of political extremism in the country. *“It made them aware that this is not the way. You live in society with other people with whom you share different values and you cannot behave like that. I do not like it either, but I cannot go out and attack on the streets. Can I? The system must have some legitimacy. And whether I will criticise the government, or protest, it is my right to decide. However, it must be in compliance with the Constitution and the laws. The burning of President Ivanov's office awakened many people from the Colourful Revolution, and the 27th of April awakened those in the so-called patriotic bloc. So, perhaps these events were unfortunately tragic, but they have an educational value for our society,”* concludes one of the experts.

In support of the thesis that political, not ethno-national extremism dominates in North Macedonia today, experts point out to the event in Divo Naselje in Kumanovo from 2015. Experts believe that this event had the potential, but did not spill over into the interethnic relations area due to the sobriety and critical analysis of the citizens on the attempt to frame it as an interethnic conflict. *“Since 2001 people have learned that you can't just push them into war. I think that they reacted very soberly. They saw that it was an isolated group and saw that this isolated group had no potential to push Albanians and Macedonians into a new conflict. Even in such a sensitive and neurotic political atmosphere that was present at the moment when Divo Naselje took place. It is an indication to me that interethnic relations may never be great, but they are not so bad. Therefore, I think that the intra-ethnic Macedonian conflict at the moment is a much greater danger to the stability on the political scene than the Macedonian-Albanian potential for conflict”,* said one expert.

And the violent behaviour of sports supporters' groups, especially at football matches, take place more in the context of social mobilisation of “thugs” than as a scene of authentic political and ideological action. According to experts, this is a scene of ultra-nationalist behaviour and hate speech, almost without exception. But as hierarchical organisations, their behaviour depends primarily on their leaders. Thus, members of supporters' groups can be actors in acts of violence and are usually abused by political structures, through their leaders, being activated for certain purposes as an instrument of the political actors. Rarely are they inspirers of extremist scenes, and act more often as disseminators of extremist messages. The experts also point out to the event that took place in the Macedonian National Theatre in December 2019, citing the behaviour of the supporters' group as an example of the internalisation of

<sup>3</sup> The civil movement “Awakening” organised signature gathering in several municipalities, and during the local elections the citizens of Shtip and Kavadarci had the opportunity for a referendum vote on the Strategy for Integration of Refugees and Foreigners prepared by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

violence in these groups, but the outcome of this case was reduced to flirting of the political parties with these extremist scenes since the political actors eliminated the social and psychological barriers that could have prevented the violent actions, but also the legal ones that were supposed to punish such behaviour.

Additionally, the intra-Macedonian conflict, according to experts, takes place through a long-running process of instrumentalisation of the civil organisation and civil sector, which does not in itself imply the need to control the civil sector, but rather the need to develop critical thinking among the citizens and recognise the frames in which fake news and misinformation are introduced.

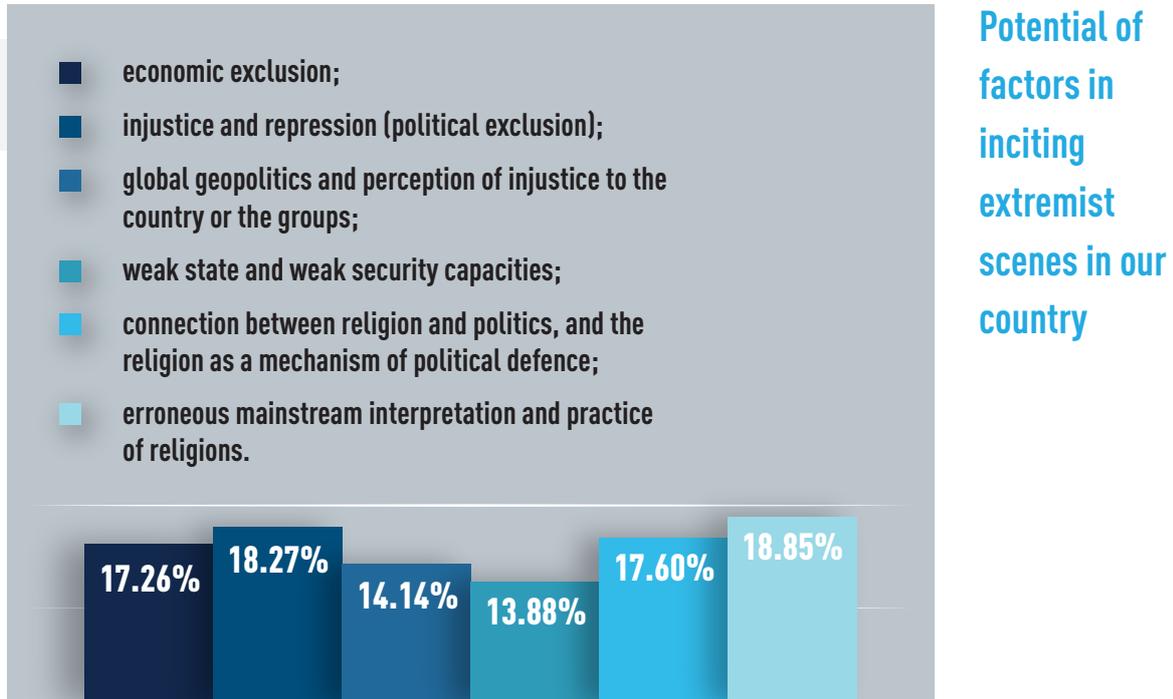
The irresponsibility and the policy of leniency in sanctioning acts arising from the spread of hatred maintain a breeding ground for political extremism. The fact that we are in some way involved in the global fight against terrorism and that today we face returnees who have taken part in foreign armies and battlefields in Syria, Ukraine or other military conflicts, indicates that we are facing religious indoctrination, *“Eastern influences”*, as dubbed by one of the experts, and radicalisation as *“a process that lives and is changing day by day,”* as pointed by another expert. The inspiration of violent extremist structures by religious leaders outside of the institutional theological teaching in the context of absence of institutional efforts for re-socialisation and reintegration of returnees and social marginalisation of individuals and families, points out to potential future threats of violent extremism.

Another external threat is the regional instability, and the experts agree that the unresolved issue of Kosovo, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the turbulent relations with Bulgaria and the strengthening of right-wing governments are affecting the situation in the country. However, the experts do not consider the threat from regional developments to be high. According to them, NATO membership and the intensive EU integration processes strengthen the capacity to absorb the destabilising regional external influences. *“We are still a meeting point of the East and the West. Global politics, wars within the Middle East, Ukraine, are parts where major issues of world politics collide. So it is clear that the global geopolitics and the conflict between, so to speak, the interests of the East and the interests of the West, is very important and very visible in the developments in our country”*, said one of the experts.

This research has taken place in the middle of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has the potential to redefine the term “threat”. Usually, the threat is intended to be embodied or concretised, to be identified through a group, community, political or economic object. However, in this case, COVID-19 also pointed out to the weakness of the citizens to stigmatise the “Other” as a culprit for the prolonged effects of restrictive measures on society, but also showed a crisis of secularism and impunity of official religious structures before the law. The health crisis also unveiled the weakness of the state to implement the rule of law and the equality of all before the law.

According to experts, the lack of political stability, social cohesion and integrated society, the perceived sense of unequal rights, poverty, high gap between the elites and the people (citizens), high levels of corruption regardless of the political affiliation and ideology, and protracted entrepreneurial exploitation of the effects of these problems by the political elites are mapped as underlying issues that give rise to extremism. *“But at the heart of the entire problem is the lack of mutual understanding and respect that always opens wide doors to possible situations that would take away peace, in general,”* said one expert. *“We have a political culture that is prone to projecting enemies and a society that is very bad at dealing with its own responsibility”*, concluded another expert.

Graph 2. Expert opinion tendencies expressed in percentages concerning the potential of factors in inciting extremist movements in our country.



According to experts, the misinterpretation of religion has the greatest potential to incite extremist scenes in our country (18.85%), followed by the perceived injustice and political exclusion (18.27%), followed by the connection between politics and religion (17.6%), the economic exclusion (17.26%) and the global politics and perception of injustice to the country (14.14%). According to experts, the aspect of a “weak state and weak security capacities” is the weakest factor in inciting extremist scenes (13.88%). An additional factor, underlined by one of the experts, is the widespread corruption.

The Internet and social media only enabled the creation of so-called Twitter revolutions, fake news and alternative interpretations, violent groups, posts, hate speech, calls for lynching and where due to anonymity and unlimited space for action, we have calls for violence. The local context where multiple ethnic groups live is not always perceived as an environment/context with more opportunities for inciting extremist scenes. Despite fragile interethnic relations, the marginalisation or exclusion from the social developments is increasingly identified as a factor for inciting political and ethno-national extremism. Thus, the context is less important, except in the case of prisons, where the experts recognise potentials for radicalisation, which points out to the need for strong rehabilitation and re-socialisation efforts while the persons are still in the penitentiary institutions.

The education and the fear of not knowing the “Others” are indicated as factors that contribute to or make people more prone to extremist interpretations of reality. “Education can influence in the process of building resistance to extremism in the country”, said one expert. She goes on to point out that *integrated education, which enables familiarisation with diversity, transmission of messages of tolerance, of gender equality, from the lowest to the highest levels of education, is key to critical thinking about diversity*, concluded the expert. An example of an institutionally led process with adverse effects is the social debate on the Law on Languages, which raised a lot of fear from the imagined implications of the law. “Formal education can be much more involved in building these principles into the social narratives”, concludes one expert.

WHAT DOES  
THIS ANALYSIS  
INDICATE?

This is especially important since young people are disproportionately more involved in extremist scenes and it is exactly these structural, but also contextual factors that make them more susceptible to indoctrination and to the process of radicalisation. The economic factors (unemployment, poverty, low standard of living), the socio-political factors (apathy, feeling of no future, feeling of impasse, dysfunction of state institutions and society), the educational factors (weak education system), the religion and the brain drain have a reinforcing effect on the involvement of young people in extremist scenes.

The potential of the extremist scenes to be a threat to public security, according to experts, mostly depends on the political and social climate that will be built in the coming period. The internal crisis has had a greater influence on fragmentation of the Macedonian bloc, and hence we should follow the effects of the change of the constitutional name of the country, the introduction of bilingualism, and the resolution of the issues with the neighbouring countries. In the Albanian ethnic community, experts do not expect the creation of a platform for violence or nationalist extremism. According to them, if it emerges, it would be as a reaction to the extreme scenes on the Macedonian side. Experts mainly focus on these two ethnic communities because they have a history of conflict.

**Motivational frame:** *What are the mobilisation messages of the extremist scenes in our country (ideology, violence as a justified form of opposition) and how is the image of the mobilising scene (group) being constructed?*

The messages of the extremist scenes are usually populist and/or apocalyptic, creating a distinction between “They” – “the politically correct elite” that betrayed the people “Us” and therefore the people must act or face destruction.

The extremist scenes in North Macedonia are global<sup>4</sup> in the sense that they are part of an “imaginary community” of like-minded people who oppose diversity and cultural change in societies. Our fellow citizens are part of foreign armies, our fellow citizens were leaders of the online rise of Donald Trump during his first candidacy for President of the United States, we have (and had) movements for de-Sorosization (Stop Operation SOROS, published on Sitel Television, 2017) of society (with traces of anti-Semitism). “Or let’s put it the other way around. There is no global extremist threat that does not have its exponent in North Macedonia”, noted one of the experts. But despite this ideological recognition, these scenes have a localised “flavour” that comes from complicated national/state/social events and situations. The main instigator of extremist scenes, however, is the “translation” of the global movements against diversity and modernisation (whether it is translated as liberal versus conservative societies, modern versus traditional values, i.e. challenging the patriarchy and the nation-states, globalisation and external influences versus re-localisation and historical defining of power relations) into the local context. According to experts, the political structures in the country have a strong influence in framing the extremist scenes, both on the left and on the right side of the political spectrum. However, they are not localised in only few segments, although the local context has the potential to frame the extremist sentiment, such as the construction of the church on the Fortress (Kale) in Skopje, which has grown into a general revolt among Albanians against the hegemony of the Macedonian community, or the resistance of the Macedonians to the restoration of the Charshi Mosque in Prilep damaged during the ethnic conflicts in 2001 as a revenge for the fallen soldiers from this city. “The local context is used to send a national message,” as one expert summarised it, “often through threats to government officials, but the local context is engaged for the purpose of achieving better reception and greater interest among the population”, concludes another expert. Monitoring hate incidents may identify the locations that have a particular potential for expression of extremist views, but the general opinion is that they are dispersed and there is no specific local context that is prone to inciting extremist scenes.

As long as politics does not provide a substantive answer to existential life issues through the economy, then a sense of home, belonging and value (meaning), a response to (perceived) injustice and exclusion, as topics will easily be framed in the messages of the extremist scenes.

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<sup>4</sup> “The COVID-19 crisis has shown that the world is one big village” said one expert.

WHAT DOES THIS ANALYSIS INDICATE?

In our case, these are usually messages related to the name of the country, the identity and valuation of the state and its resources (including human resources), then also messages about the daily injustice we experience as small communities and states and the exclusion from the developments inside, as citizens and communities, in respect of crucial state issues. The aim is to provoke *“disgust from the mainstream<sup>5</sup> politics among the people, anger, disgust and indignation”*, as one expert puts it, from the *“politically correct elite”*, and therefore, people must either act or face destruction. Thus, the extremist scenes offer something that seems like a more acceptable alternative.

Most recent slogans or messages that can be linked to political extremism are:

- The national above all;
- We are right, the others are not;
- We build, the others destroy;
- “Dead Shiptar (Albanian), good Shiptar (Albanian)!” versus “Dead giaour - good giaour!”;
- Stolen/captured state;
- The country that has always existed must be defended;
- Never North, always Macedonia.

The messages in our country are mostly of ethno-nationalist and political character and indicate superiority, domination over the others, who is better and who is worse, and they often make use of hate speech and creating stereotypes and prejudices towards the others who do not fit into their group, i.e. community. The rhetoric uses emotionally charged words, such as threat (for example, from the so-called Tirana Platform), defence of honour, reputation, from the traitors, attack by a disloyal minority, hegemony of a group or religion. Most extremist messages are anti-European - anti-American, supremacy-oriented<sup>6</sup> messages of superiority. Violence is considered legitimate if the group and/or the state are being defended. Calls for physical violence still exist, but according to the experts, the potency of this discourse is declining. *“Violence begets violence, but it is not always functional. In our country, I think that now there is less plotting, I think that the political factors have become aware”*, underlined one of the experts.

These messages are often followed by iconography which indicates the affiliation, cultural memory and distribution of power between the groups, in a way that it shows who of them belong and who of them are excluded from the socio-political space. Some of the experts agree that ethno-symbolism and the use of symbols that are part of the cultural memory or religious identity of a group (again viewed as a homogeneous community) form part of the visual representation of extremist scenes in our country. This predominantly ideological form of marking the public space makes nationality, ethnic and religious identity to be superior to civic identity. In our country, such identification occurs not only within the extremist scenes, but also in the representation of the political parties. Experts agree that these are symbols of exclusion, territorialisation and additional polarisation of groups in society, in the form of “us” versus “them”. What needs to be done, according to one expert, is to find common symbols of the communities that are inclusive, neutral and universal (for example, displaying the natural beauty of the country).

The rhetoric of the extremist scenes intensifies in times of important political developments. That is why one of the experts points out that the importance of the messages lies not only in the content, but also in the timing. The ethno-nationalism and the political “kitchens” are especially active in the run-up to important political developments, as it is happening today amid the parliamentary elections campaign in July 2020. *“Because regardless of the messages they send, what is important is that they know the mentality of the people, and we are a society that is still not sufficiently educated, i.e. undereducated in terms of media literacy in order to understand the difference, to identify the manipulation and the real news. And what interests*

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<sup>5</sup> Mainstream should be understood as: “ideas, opinions or activities that are considered to be normal or conventional, a dominant trend in thought, fashion or art”.

<sup>6</sup> Supremacy is a condition or feature of one who is superior and dominates over the others. In politics, the supreme power is the highest authority or the highest rank. In international relations, it is the domination of one power over another in a military conflict or in a confrontation with other actors.

and problems people have, the perceived injustice, the marginalisation, the frustration; there is a message that has no ideological consistency, but an ideological goal. And usually they achieve the goal by sending the most radical message at a certain point in time and it depends on the structure or target group”, said another expert. Today it seems that the main battle is being fought on social media. Verbal violence dominates the calls for physical confrontation. Hate speech is an instrument of the toxic ethno-nationalism that is particularly dominant during important political developments. “There is social frustration, economic exclusion of a large part of society, and social networks have made things worse. There is a complete lack of understanding and polarisation into two, three, five camps”, indicated another expert. Some experts point out to complete cohabitation of the messages of ethno-nationalism and the political actors who tell us that we still live in a “captured state where all processes are controlled by ethno-nationalist parties and when they need it, they play that card. It also allows them to present themselves as factors of stability, and they keep the situation under control, but have the capacity to make trouble, and that is why they should be listened to, and their nonsense should also be tolerated even by the foreign factors. This is part of the mainstream game, which is not only part of the extremes of the political spectrum, which are growing, which exist, but are not so strong”, said the expert. In our country, security and stability are still motivating terms that provoke a reaction from the citizens. “Insecurity causes fear and panic among the people that something bad could happen again and they vote for the political party that guarantees them security in terms of protecting their rights”, concluded another expert.

Experts expect the flammable ethno-nationalist and politically-extreme messages to lose potency in the fight against fake news. But, in order for it to yield positive results, the functional and media literacy of the citizens should be raised, in order for them to be able to recognise fake news, to recognise disinformation, to be able to check from several news sources. The situation with the Covid-19 pandemic is not encouraging. The public institutions in the midst of a health crisis are struggling with fake news and conspiracy theories that delegitimise the existence of the virus and/or its mortality. Other such events are the developments around the Law on the Use of Languages. “We have always been very easy prey to ideological propagandist actions”, concludes one expert.

**Prognostic frame:** *The main lines of action proposed by the extremist scenes (attribution of responsibility to ethno-nationalism and the degree of threat, the main instigating factors, the biggest consequences of ethno-nationalism in our country).*

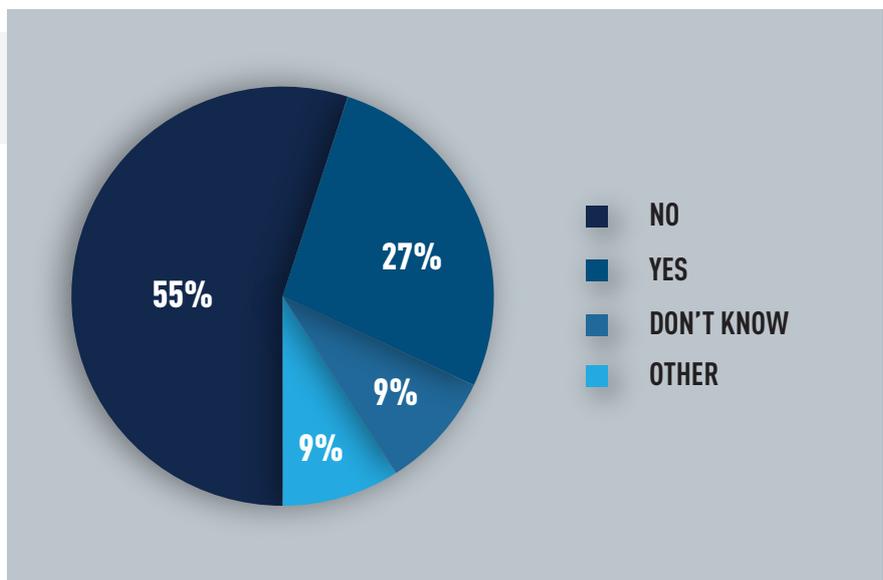
- *The role of political parties*

Experts agree that ethno-nationalism is often abused and put at the disposal of certain political and social processes in the country. Although the competent institutions may recognise it and are aware of its instrumentalisation, still the preventive measures and activities taken are insufficient to prevent the damage from the entrepreneurial use. Therefore, experts generally agree that ethno-nationalism is recognised as a threat to public security in our country by the relevant entities, but without taking concrete action, i.e. activities in action for managing it.

Ethno-nationalism is often like a “filling” in a multicultural “cake” that can give rise to caries only if regular checks are not made.

A clash of the left and the right in the country is theoretically possible, especially due to the rising polarisation in society, but the experts see a small possibility for it to happen in reality (55%). Only 27% of the experts think that there might be a clash between the political left and right other than the elections, and 9% of the experts respectively do not know or think that there is another possibility. They remind us that we are facing a political culture where it is easy to create idols and cults towards political leaders, and thus the decisions of the leaders are received uncritically and without argument. Hence, political leaders can easily manage their members, and the party organisation and structure further facilitates and enables them to do so.

Graph 3. Expert opinion tendencies expressed in percentages concerning the possibility for a clash between the political left and right other than the political elections.



Possibility for a clash between the political left and right other than the political elections

As a “political religion” (Smith, 2000, pp. 791-814), nationalism is associated with the messianisation<sup>7</sup> of politics and the politicisation of the ethnic sphere (Glazer, 1983), and this is quite true for North Macedonia. According to experts, citizens (not just communities) have learned lessons from the past. Maintaining a more relaxed atmosphere in society and higher degree of tolerance has a neutralising effect on the extremist scenes, especially in some extremist movements in that regard. Although the extremist scenes today, as well as in the past, have been more right-wing oriented, the changes in the social structure, the impoverishment of citizens and the social unrest are seen as future challenges and possible sources of security threats. *“The pandemic itself has caused many problems in the economy, and thus many social issues that the government or some future government will have to address in order to maintain security in the country, and here I see the potential for giving rise to some movements”*, concludes another expert.

The main motivating factors for ethno-nationalism in our country are the perceived situation of inequality between groups and communities, the historical processes, the poor critical awareness of citizens, the fragile democracy and political instability, the weak economic power and low economic standard.

The main consequences of ethno-nationalism in the country are: interethnic tensions, division of citizens, absence of communication between communities, violence, hate speech, spreading intolerance, tolerance of corrupt behaviour of the ethnic elite for social peace, hatred, lack of common political identity, *“a system of Macedonians, of Albanians, of impunity, a system of tolerance of injustices and a system that pushes many people to emigrate”*, said one expert. For another expert, a consequence of the ethno-nationalism in our country is the *“killing of democracy”*. *“I think the two communities know less and less about each other and have less need to know each other. We do not live together, we live next to each other!”*, states another expert.

Political parties, supports’ groups and associations of citizens are seen as key actors in sustaining this fragmentation. For some, the system itself has encouraged fragmentation, and in the absence of measures for cultural rapprochement and learning the language of the others, the alienation and lack of need to know each other are reinforced.

<sup>7</sup> Messianisation is the tendency of assigning a saviour role to a person, actor, or other entity; emotionalisation, support of social, political, religious and other goals and beliefs with fervour and passion.

### • *The role of ethnic communities*

Experts agree that currently the potential for ethno-national radicalisation is greater among the Macedonians. The sense of losing a status, the challenged domination and the demands for redistribution of the resources and power are instigators of ethno-nationalism in the Macedonian community. The regulation of rights, including identity, cultural and linguistic rights of the non-majority communities with the Ohrid Framework Agreement did not extinguish the nationalism of the other ethnic communities, but made it manageable. *“The fear that the state will disintegrate, the fear of irredentism, and the fear that we will undergo federalisation, have not been justified”*, said one expert.

Experts relatively agree that the eradication of ethno-nationalism in our country is almost impossible. Ethnic, and thus religious and linguistic markers are dominant in the identity politics. What we probably need to learn is how to manage this diversity. Managing diversity in everyday life and politics is something we should improve. *“We raise unimportant new demands again and we are forever stuck in that circle of ethno-nationalist hegemony and ethno-nationalist victimisation. This will be present in the long term. Relevant political energy will be invested in it and maybe it is better to learn to keep this under control than to hope that one day it will disappear because, in my opinion, it will not happen,”* said determinedly one expert.

### • *The role of civil society*

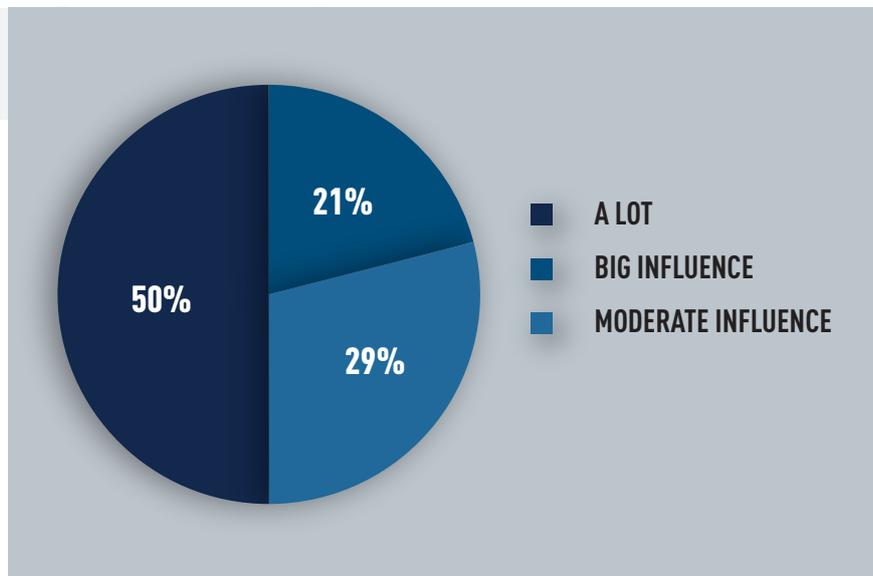
It is necessary to encourage reconciliation of the ethnic pluralism and the civic multiculturalism, not only as processes between ethnic groups, but also within communities. However, this is not a linear process and it encounters resistance. Above all, from individuals and scenes which primarily have such ethno-national consciousness in the foreground and refuse to become a kind of “citizens”. *“I think it is a good idea, but in our country it has never worked, especially because the relationship between that civic and ethno-national identity is not completely binary”*, said one expert. Experts recognise an era of extreme citizenism and extreme ethno-nationalism in our country, and an important lesson is the search for compromise and that there are no quick solutions to the structural problems in the unstable identity field. *“They need to look for solutions by meeting halfway, we should position ourselves regionally, as well as globally, in a more realistic manner than what one or the other camp advocates. Neither the EU will save us and bring a revival tomorrow, nor will the construction of Skopje 2014 make us greater Macedonians. This opposition is a waste of time”*, indicated one of the experts.

Experts agree that while we remain a society that is vulnerable to the threats of ethno-nationalist extremist movements, the potency of the ethnic question as a diagnosis and attribution of responsibility is diminishing. Recent history has shown that citizens are resistant to the cruel manipulation of the ethnic identity of the “Others” as a threat to the existence of the community. That is why the extremist scenes in our country lose the ethnic dimension of difference between the citizens as main mobilisation framework of the ethnicity.

### • *The role of media*

Accompanying elements of the extremist scenes in North Macedonia are the media and the dehumanisation of the “Others”, as well as religion, its interpretation and the behaviour of the religious leaders. The potency of political extremism also lies in the fact that it can be easily ignited and in the way in which media report and frame events through the prism of political and ethno-nationalism. Experts agree that the media play an important role in sustaining the perceived conflict between groups and in legitimising certain extremist narratives. *“You have to prepare the ground, and the media are helping you with that”*, said one expert. The situation with the media in our country is not encouraging in terms of the fact that the policy of presentation of diversity may change in the near future. *“The biggest danger is that the media are becoming part of the propaganda of fake news. The symbiosis with politics is already something normal. We cannot change that because there is economic and political dependence, and there are interests as well. But fake news is the problem”*, said one expert. Especially the non-regulation of social media is an aspect that enables the spread of alternative views on events from the social reality.

Graph 4. Expert opinion tendencies expressed in percentages concerning the degree to which the media and their way of reporting incite political and ethnic extremism (grades starting from 1 – not at all - to 5 – a lot).



How much the media and their way of reporting incite political and ethnic extremism?

Thus, 50% of the experts believe that the media have a huge role in inciting political and ethnic extremism, 21% believe that the media have a great influence, and 29% believe that the media have a moderate influence. None of the experts thinks that the media have little or no influence on inciting political and ethnic extremism. Therefore, the fight against fake news should be led through cooperation with the media and by strengthening them in order to have objective, impartial, ethical and responsible reporting.

- *The role of religion*

The ethno-nationalism and political extremism in our country is also associated with the politicisation of religion (Smith, 2000, pp. 791-814). Due to its character, which is similar to religion, nationalism clashes with conventional religion (Hertz, 1944). However, this clash in North Macedonia does not produce potent religion-based violence. According to experts, in our country, religion as a belief, but not its formal representatives (religious institutions), has an important cohesive function. *“Religion can be a particularly important integration factor, even more important than the multi-ethnic one. People in these territories get more easily connected through religious narratives”*, said one expert. The ethno-nationalism as a narrative of domination of one ethnic group over the others has always mobilised more than the narrative of religious supremacy, despite some flirtations of the state and the Orthodox religion for establishing a “state religion”. Religious tolerance is a characteristic of our territories, and according to them, it is part of the reason why the 2001 conflict was not on a larger scale. We need to be careful about the way religious teachings are interpreted and about the trust that religious representatives and leaders enjoy. The activities of recruiting and mobilising people to fight on foreign battlefields in the Middle East or on the front in Ukraine indicate that religiously-mobilised extremism is an active process in our country and requires the attention of the public policies and religious institutions. The trust in the official religious institutions, and especially their leaders, is declining, according to experts. The financial power of religious communities is an additional factor for them to be perceived as powerful, but also as corrupt institutions. *“People are religious, we are a highly religious and conservative society, but that does not mean that they have high trust in religious institutions, such as the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Religious Community. They rather have faith in the idea of God, in religion as such”*, said one expert. The behaviour of religious leaders in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic has further undermined

public trust in them, which was evident from the insults and hate speech on social media. And instead of cooperating with institutions during the health crisis, the religious communities have raised doubts about science, the reliability of information provided by the public institutions, and the state's capacities to deal with the pandemic. Citizens see this as irresponsible and thus more rarely put themselves in the role of vocal advocates of the views of religious communities. At the same time, the attitude of the state towards the religious institutions in this period, according to experts, shows flirtation between these two centres of power and violation of secularism. However, according to experts, religious institutions have proved passive in many cases of ethnic background, although they could play a major role in preventing such situations. The experts consider that the construction of new religious buildings is perceived by the public as an expression of superiority and domination over the other, which strengthens the discourse of mutual hatred, intolerance and ethno-nationalism. According to experts, the violation of secularism also occurs through the flirtation of the political parties with the religious structures when the religious communities are not sanctioned for illegal activities. The vacuum created with the reduced level of authority over sometimes corrupt officials, leaves room for other people to use it and promote a different interpretation of the religious teaching. Therefore, experts believe that it is necessary to promote the learning of religions and their history, but also to involve local religious leaders in policies for creating counter-narratives and alternative narratives in the fight against radicalisation that leads to violent and ethno-extremist actions. This is especially emphasised by the religious communities. The principles of secularism are sometimes an obstacle for the involvement of religious leaders (and persons) in the policies and development practices, expecting that the primary function of these individuals is to provide theological advice. However, the religious communities feel that their participation in the thematic design of responses to extremist scenes is unfairly restricted and that they can contribute to the development of positive attitudes and a different view of society of the people who are radicalised and hold extremist views. According to religious communities, although religion is not the main and only source of extremism, it (i.e. the wrong theological advice) still can unfortunately contribute to radicalisation. *"If more space is given to appropriate religious people (not to any religious person) to participate in giving answers to these topics, then it could lead to greater awareness of the dangers of these phenomena, and reduce the risk emerging from them"*, stated one religious community.

## POLICIES AND SOLUTIONS

- *Institutional capacities and policies:*

In assessing the capacities of the institutions, experts generally agree that in recent years there has been progress in terms of defining strategic orientation documents and in terms of the approach in countering terrorism and violent extremism. What stands out are some risk factors that can reduce the success of the strategic efforts, such as poor performance of public institutions in implementing action plans and in clearly converting the needs of institutions into visible projects in the field of counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism, which are an expression of horizontal and vertical coordination of institutions. Experts agree that in both the supposedly right and the supposedly left political option in the country there is consent on the seriousness of the issue of violent extremism and terrorism. According to them, even the right wing in the Macedonian bloc creates awareness of the danger of religiously inspired radicalism. *"Awareness is being created, but when it needs to be translated into political action, then the politics has the determining value"*, said one expert. It is the political interventionism and the brain drain from this problem area which are the factors of long-term danger to successful countering of violent extremism.

According to experts, it is crucial to work at local level on prevention and better coordination between the bodies working in that aspect, not only in the security structures, but also in education, labour and social policy, and civil society. *"The rejection, condemnation, isolation and ghettoization of people who are part of extremist scenes take effect on local level. Therefore, the local level in the next 30 years will be crucial. Without the information and trust on local level, it is difficult to expect success at central level"*, indicated one expert. Early signs of radicalisation that leads to extremist action can be identified at local level, and can later be prevented.

- *Capacities of civil society organisations:*

The experts share the opinion that the civil society organisations do not work enough in this thematic field. In particular, they believe that civil society organisations should be integrated in the field of prevention. According to them, the state has developed tools (strategies and action plans) that in cooperation with the civil sector should be operationalized at local level. Additionally, the range of donors who are interested in this field is greater and there should be coordination of the public and civil society sector in relation to the activities in this field. Networking and informal platforms are also needed for countering violent extremism and countering terrorism, which would be active in condemning all events of political extremism, violent ethno-nationalism and hate speech.

- *Rehabilitation and reintegration of former members of extremist scenes in the current social developments:*

Experts agree that institutions and civil society have not developed knowledge and practices on how to “stay out” of extremist scenes. *“I have not seen a single documentary or TV report about a man who returned from Syria and said that instead of 77 virgins what awaits you there is misery, poverty, and oppression, everything opposite of what they actually promise you. When I see at least one article, at least one documentary, at least one testimony, I will agree that we learn from it. In this way I do not see how we make use of them and if it only happens at some closed workshops, it is not enough. It should be public, to send an important message to all citizens”*, said one expert. There is also consensus that we should encourage ourselves and include people who have been part of extremist scenes as educators of a different lifestyle, although experts point out that this process has its challenges, above all, in restoring people's trust in the institutions, the law and the state.

### **Top priorities for the future in respect of ethnic and political extremism and their violent forms**

According to experts, the main priority for the future is to establish accountability and a fair process for the people involved in such scenes. Ensuring a sense of equality, equal treatment for all and equal relation to all citizens contributes to a social dialogue on the values of inclusion and equality, but also increases the trust in institutions. Experts are not optimistic that we will be able to resolve all the issues that have the potential to provoke a conflict; however, by reinforcing trust between citizens of different religious and ethnic affiliation, by creating a platform for common values and public good, the power of instrumentalising diversity in extremist scenes will be reduced. *“Building friendships and bridges that must not be abused or betrayed”*, said one expert.

The policies of resilience should be built through a multi-sectoral approach and coordination at all levels in explaining and specifying the issue of extremism (involvement of civil society organisations, religious communities, and political parties). Particularly those who are affected by the issues should be involved in creating policies, i.e. quality involvement of communities in the public policies and solutions should be ensured.

And the third priority is to build alternative narratives and counter-narratives against the discourse used by extremist movements, whether religious, political or ethno-nationalist.

At the local level, according to experts, work should be done to increase the awareness of the authorities about the responsibility in creating the databases of violent extremism, as well as increasing the capacity of local authorities to monitor and report on the number, character and level of violent incidents, as well as extremist rhetoric emerging in the community.

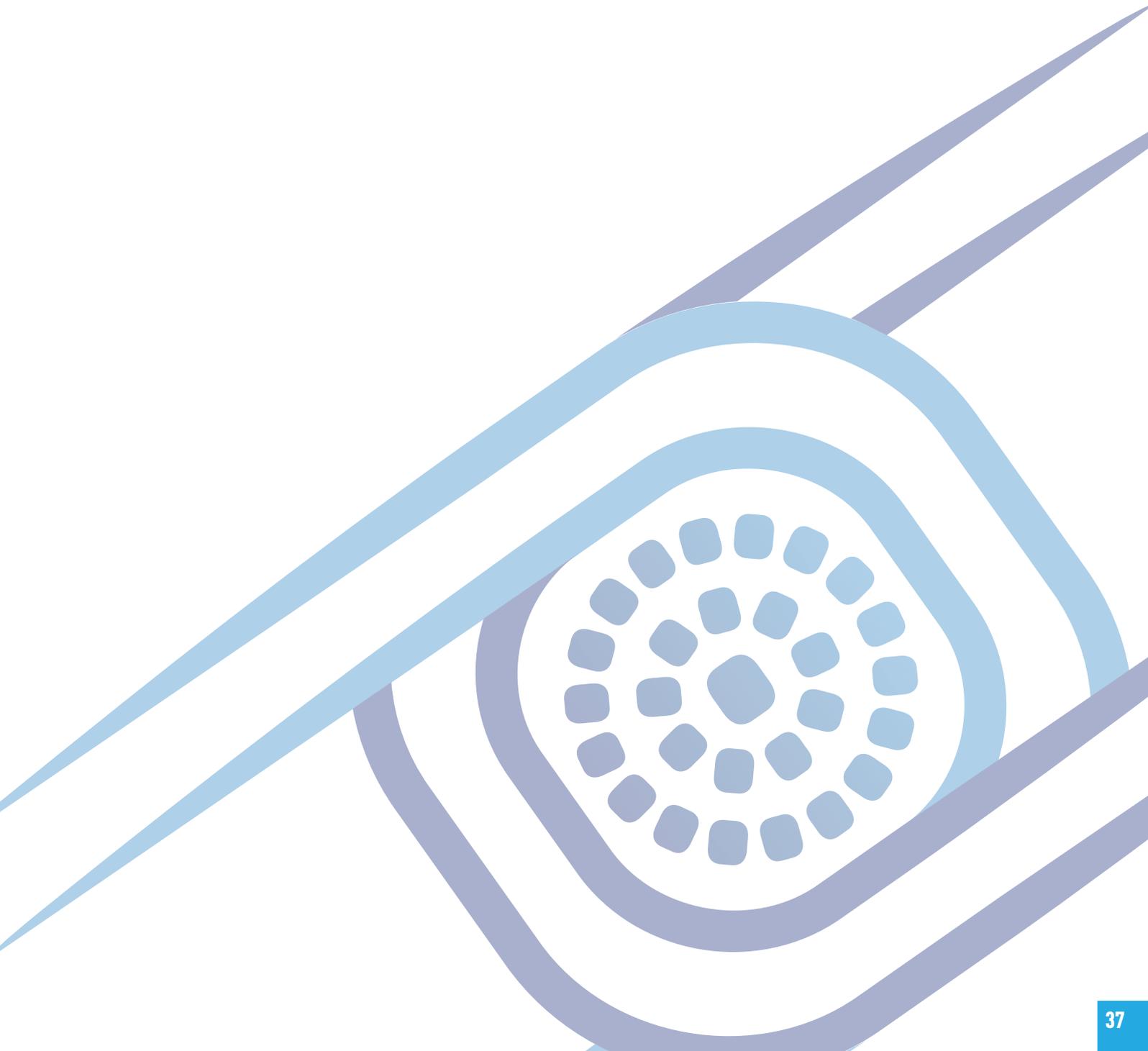
Finally, according to the experts, we need to *“set realistically achievable goals, to get out of the concept of ‘we will do’, and take action instead, and increase the visibility of the measures taken”*. According to them, there is a lack of greater transparency in terms of the activities undertaken in this field, to contextualise policy-making and to develop an endogenous successful practice for dealing with extremism, rehabilitation, re-socialisation and reintegration of former “members” of extremist scenes. Of course, preconditions for this to happen are the increase in the level of critical thinking and media literacy of the

citizens, and the implementation of honest, participatory processes where the citizens see the effect of their participation.

Pointed out as good practices in dealing with extremism are the local prevention councils operating in the municipalities where there is institutional representation of other ethnic communities. They are a useful tool primarily because of the multiagency approach they have and how they treat the issues. As part of a project for safe schools, the police have encouraged a debate among students about sports violence and hate speech.

The interviewed experts give the following key messages to policy makers:

- Establishing accountability, a sense of equality, equal treatment for all and equal relation to all citizens contributes towards social dialogue on the values of inclusion and equality, but also increases the trust in institutions;
- Involving diversity at all levels in the public policies, highlighting the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural society as an asset, as a public good and making use of the potential it generates;
- Pluralisation of the public sphere and integration of all issues, not only the ethnic ones, in the communication with the “Others”;
- Learning from the mistakes of the past, neutrality of politicians and the policies they create in order to encourage the civic character;
- Involvement of citizens in policy making through a mechanism of real impact and influence;
- The messages should be transmitted in parallel in the formal part of education as well as in the informal part through the civil society sector;
- Sending strong messages against violent extremism;



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Dominant opinion in North Macedonia is that there is political and ethno-nationalist extremism, but that highly extreme groups in the country are marginal since they form part of certain major political parties and do not have the power to take over the governance of institutions. Ideologically driven extremism dominates over purely religious extremism. According to Abbas (Abbas, 2017, pp. 54-61), the extremist scenes should be seen in their contrast. “As exclusive and self-reinforcing narratives, the actions and perspectives of one group instigate the other. Policy makers need to understand political and religious extremism as phenomena with shared local driving forces and influences. This approach will also avoid misrecognition and insensitivity in the efforts for countering terrorism in general. It also creates valuable policy solutions based on the idea of social cohesion (Abbas, 2017, pp. 54-61)”.

## **To public institutions and municipalities**

- Developing measures and activities for early detection and warning;
- Strengthening the work of local prevention councils, especially in the area of prevention and data collection;
- Multi-sectoral approach in addressing this issue: vertical and horizontal coordination of public institutions;
- Learning through data from the local level, from the information of the direct participants, and deconstructing the messages of the extremist scenes;
- Linking the strategies from the public security sector with actors from the sectors of education, labour and social policy, and culture, and especially with the relevant strategies at the local level;
- Discouraging hate speech through appropriate sanctioning;
- Connecting with the media and combating fake news;
- Connecting with religious communities and using the religious authorities in policies and development practices to design appropriate solutions to extremism, especially in presenting a positive way of life;
- Pluralisation of the public sphere and integration of all issues, not only the ethnic ones, in the communication with the “Others”;
- Managing diversity in all policies at national and local level, in a participatory, transparent and inclusive manner.

## **To civil society organisations**

- Expanding the scope of action on the topic of security and terrorism and refocusing from only a few target groups to the general public;

- Developing programmes for prevention, early detection and warning and implementing them in cooperation with local stakeholders;
- Uniting in networks and platforms that will not only be correctors of hate speech but also of the stigmatisation and discrimination of former members of extremist scenes;
- Developing and jointly implementing programmes for re-socialisation and rehabilitation of former members of extremist scenes and developing knowledge of “what it means to be outside the extremist scene” through cooperation with public institutions and the academia;
- Connecting with the media, greater access of the public to these topics; creating a platform for sharing knowledge and information;
- Involvement in increasing the media literacy of citizens and in combating fake news.

### **Transversal recommendations**

- Strengthening the actors in the implementation of integrated education, by including topics of critical thinking on social reality and political and ethno-nationalist extremism;
- Rule of law and a sense of justice and equality of all citizens;
- Creating independent self-organised scenes of citizens who basically aim to critically (re)think the reality outside the dichotomy of ethnic, political and religious diversity and are scenes of inclusion, solidarity and sharing of decision-making power and responsibility for the public good.

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# Annex 1:

## DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF THE RESPONDENTS

Respondent number	Sex	Ethnicity	Sector
1	male	Albanian	Public institution
2	male	Macedonian	Academia
3	male	Macedonian	Civil society organisation
4	male	Albanian	Municipality
5	female	Macedonian	Civil society organisation
6	male	Macedonian	Civil society organisation
7	male	Albanian	Academia
8	female	Albanian	Academia
9	male	Macedonian	Civil society organisation /think-tank
10	male	Macedonian	Academia
11	female	Macedonian	Academia
12	male	Macedonian	Religious community
13	male	Albanian	Religious community
14	female	Macedonian	Public institution
15	male	Macedonian	Public institution

<sup>i</sup> In February 2015, the then opposition party SDSM, as part of the project the “Truth about Macedonia”, began publishing 33 “bombs” – illegally wiretapped conversations of over 20 thousand citizens, which gave rise to mass civic self-organisation seeking change, the so-called “Colourful Revolution”.

<sup>ii</sup> The events took place on the 9th and 10th of May, 2015 in the Kumanovo settlement of “Tode Mendol”, locally dubbed “Divo Naselje”, when an armed group from Kosovo attacked the Macedonian security forces. Eight police officers and fourteen members of the Kosovo group were killed and at least 40 were injured. The events took place four months after the opposition party began publishing the so-called “bombs”.

<sup>iii</sup> Although bilingualism has existed in North Macedonia since 2008, in 2017 it was politicised through the Law on the Use of the Albanian Language proposed by the platform of the Albanian parties from the country prepared in Skopje, but signed in Tirana, which the public perceived as an imposed obligation for compulsory learning of the Albanian language. The phrase “Tirana Platform” evolved in the vocabulary of the political parties (especially of VMRO-DPMNE) from “platform” to “Tirana Platform” aimed at mobilising the party members and the public following the inability to form a parliamentary majority and it became “synonymous with the political struggle between the Macedonian political forces from opposing political backgrounds to prove ‘patriotism’ in defence of Macedonianism and on the other hand the ‘betrayal’ of Macedonianism in the eyes of the Macedonians in the Republic of Macedonia” (Halili, 2017, text “Tirana Platform” published in Plus Info, 10 November, 2017).

<sup>iv</sup> The agreement is titled “Final Agreement for the settlement of the differences as described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Parties” and aims to overcome the differences concerning the constitutional name of the country, the naming of the language and the nationality. The agreement was signed by the Foreign Ministers of the two countries on June 17, 2018 in the Greek part of Prespa, in the village of Psarades (Nivici) in the presence of the Prime Ministers of the two countries and the UN mediator, Matthew Nimetz.

<sup>v</sup> On September 30, 2018, a consultative referendum was held at state level to change the name of the country into the Republic of North Macedonia for general use, with an obligation for constitutional amendments, as a condition for EU and NATO membership. 36.91% of the total number of registered voters voted on the referendum, thus not reaching the required turnout of 50% in order for the results of the referendum to be accepted. Out of the total number of voters who went to the referendum, 91.46% voted “yes”. In January 2019, the Assembly adopted the constitutional amendments provided by the Prespa Agreement and the Republic of Macedonia changed its official name into the Republic of North Macedonia.

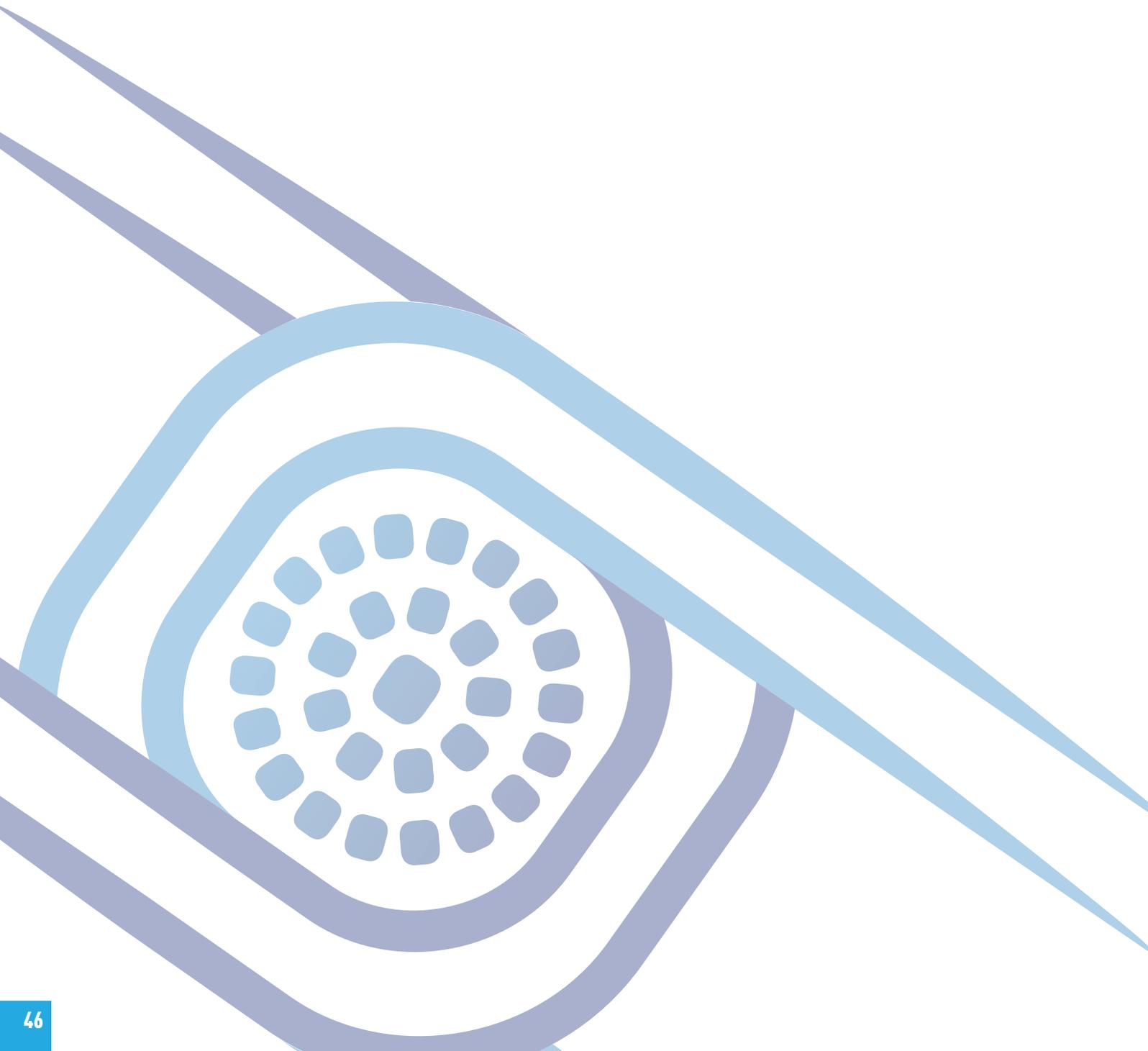
<sup>vi</sup> As a result of the political events in the period 2015-2019, the citizens mobilised in several social movements that supported or opposed the decisions of the ruling political parties. “I protest” was a reaction to the events related to the so-called Colourful Revolution, “I Boycott” was a reaction to the referendum for change of the name of the country and “For a common Macedonia” was a reaction to the so-called Tirana platform, gathering also the revolt over the change of the name of the country.

<sup>vii</sup> On April 27, 2017, a large group of citizens violently stormed the Parliament during the procedure for proclamation of a new chairman of the Parliament, and there were MPs and media workers who were attacked and suffered blood injuries. In 2019, 17 people were charged with terrorist endangerment of the constitutional order, of which only one was acquitted. Some of the accused have been convicted of attempted murder with premeditation of a leader of an Albanian political party. Some of the sentences are for a total of 211 years, while 15 people have been granted amnesty by law in the Parliament. According to the indictment, there has been coordination between the groups of citizens in front of the Parliament and part of the MPs of VMRO-DPMNE inside the Parliament.

<sup>viii</sup> On April 12, 2012, four boys aged 18 to 21 and a man aged 45, all from Skopje, were killed near Skopje. Six people were sentenced to life in prison for the murders, but the Supreme Court overturned the verdicts. The case was taken over by the Special Public Prosecutor's Office over alleged additional evidence stemming from the illegally wiretapped conversations. The motives for this murder remain unclear.

<sup>ix</sup> On August 1, 2017, the Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation between Macedonia and Bulgaria was signed in Skopje, whereby both sides commit themselves to finding a consensual agreement on the open issues of interpretation of the common elements of the history and culture of the two countries and commit themselves to improving the cooperation in all aspects of life.

<sup>x</sup> The call for de-Sorosization was part of the platform of VMRO-DPMNE, which advocated for “purgation” of the work of civil society organisations in the country as part of the idea of building an independent civil sector that will not be under anyone's control. The George Soros Foundation – “Foundation Open Society Macedonia” (FOSM) was pointed out as the “culprit” for generating a crisis in the country by supporting projects of civil society organisations and media.







*„The eradication of ethno-nationalism in our country is almost impossible. Ethnic, religious and linguistic markers are dominant in the identity politics. What we probably need to learn is how to manage this diversity.”*



[www.nexus.org.mk](http://www.nexus.org.mk)



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